

NOUR MOBARAK: LOGISTIC ELASTIQUE

Review by Benjamin Clifford
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The first impression made by Nour Mobarak’s solo debut in New York is celestial: several roughly spherical objects are scattered throughout Miguel Abreu’s Orchard Street gallery, like an eccentric solar system in miniature. These moons and planetoids are accompanied by *Subterranean Bounce (Exposed)* (2020), a recorded soundscape of mysterious objects rolling, bouncing, scraping, and colliding. Where thinkers from Pythagoras to Kepler argued that the movement of planets and stars should bounce sound according to an orderly mathematical harmony, Mobarak’s music of the spheres is chaotic and unpredictable. Dualism preoccupies the artist, and this opposition of regularity and the irregularity is one example. Her installation also addresses the relationship between organic and synthetic materials and, most importantly, sex and death: most of the works on view are made from *Trametes versicolor*, a fungus whose reproductive cycle transmutes decay into new, often beautiful, life.

Mobarak’s “Sphere Studies”—her ersatz planetoids—are typically grown inside an acrylic sphere which the artist has punctured in various places. The fungus first fills the sphere, then emerges from these holes. When the acrylic shell is removed, Mobarak is left with a dense but irregular spheroid studded with elegant knots and ridges of fungal growth. The patterning of these nodes varies: the moderately-sized *Sphere Study 5 (Priss)* (2020), for example, boasts a relatively unstructured scatter, while the first orb a visitor will encounter, *Sphere Study 6 (Old Money)* (2020) is ringed by two coherent and roughly perpendicular bands. The coloration of this latter work is particularly striking, its surface composed of earth tones, paler off-whites, and hints of grayish blue in attenuated layers that recall Clyfford Still’s signature motifs.

Two of the “Sphere Studies” retain the synthetic casing that shapes their growth, but the effect in each work is quite different. The acrylic shell of *Sphere Study 2 (Pure Study)* (2020) shows

us the regular ruled grid that Mobarak used to plot her perforations of the orb's surface. This system of longitude and latitude both heightens the planetary effect of the work and provides a formal contrast to the gracefully spiraling curves of fungus that emerge from its hidden interior. By contrast, the experimental *Sphere Study 3 (Failed Sphere)* (2020) trades a rigid surface for an inflatable beach ball. Rather than “inflating” the ball evenly as it grew, Mobarak's fungus began to digest it, leaving the brightly colored vinyl surface puckered and creased within their homboidal spaces delineated by a loose network of protruding growths.

The installation of Mobarak's fungal solar system is well thought out, and guides the visitor in a gradual descent through the gallery. The first work encountered at the door rests alone on a high plinth, with the next two likewise isolated but on progressively lower columns. Then, *Sphere Study 4 (Dilettante Politic)* (2020), the largest of the spheres, rests on a wide, very low platform accompanied by a pair of small “moons.” These satellites again juxtapose organic with synthetic materials: one is a knot of fungus, unadorned by distinct ridges or growths, while the other—*Clear Flower* (2020), a rare work that does not contain fungus—is an ethereal construction of foam and semi-transparent plastic sheeting. The low plinth that supports these works occupies most of the floor space at the rear of the gallery, channeling the viewer into a kind of perimeter walkway. Here you will encounter two works sitting directly on the ground, and, in a clever bit of visual play, a large construction hung on the back wall which at first glance resembles an expanse of cracked and rutted earth that has been framed and rotated from the horizontal to the vertical plane.

This wall-bound piece is titled *Reproductive Logistics* (2020), and although its appearance suggests the geologic, it reorients Mobarak's meditation on life and death from a cosmic to an individual scale. The artist composed this work within a shipping crate, using the genetic material—hair, semen—of former sexual partners to nourish the growth of a massive fungal bed. Further emphasizing the personal specificity of this work, Mobarak has intervened in the reproductive process, arresting growth in some areas with rubbing alcohol and painting a self-portrait on the developing surface. Only traces remain in scattered patches of color, as Mobarak's image, too, became food for her fungus in a kind of productive self-annihilation.

Three other works hang on the walls of the gallery. One seems a companion to the “Sphere Studies”: a transparent sheet of plastic studded with circular protrusions. The other two act as an intriguing counterpoint to Mobarak's flexible, symbiotic understanding of life and death. Nestled within the bookshelf that occupies the front windows of the gallery is a small sheet

of blue acrylic inscribed with the words HYPHAE and HYDRA. “Hyphae” is clear enough: this term refers to the filaments that make up a fungal mycelium. But what of “hydra”? The answer is found on the right wall of the gallery, near the low plinth towards the rear. Here we encounter *Logistics of Immortality* (2021), a sample slide containing the corpse of a hydra—a tiny freshwater organism. Curiously, hydras do not undergo cellular deterioration, and thus can only die as a result of some external intervention. Here, life and death are absolute, binary states, a fact signaled by the choice to install this easy-to-miss work directly above a light switch: on or off, with nothing in between. Although fungus maybe able to occupy that ambiguous middle ground where death becomes new life, Mobarak’s hydra seems a gentle, if sobering, reminder that for us unfortunate mortals, the end is final.

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